

Children with Special Needs

Frequently Asked Questions

The term “Children with Special Needs” has a broad scope that refers to young children (B-Kindergarten Entry) with disabilities, special health care needs, and preschool special education.

Question: How do the Benchmarks address children with special needs or disabilities, or who are not developing typically?

Answer: The Early Learning and Development Benchmarks Advisory Panel has worked to address special needs in three ways:

1. in the Benchmarks development process;
2. in the content of the Benchmarks; and
3. in implementation of the Benchmarks.

1. The Benchmarks Development Process

Guiding Principles. As a first task, the Advisory Panel created a set of Guiding Principles for the Benchmarks work. (See pages 6 - 9 of the Benchmarks Review Draft for the full text of the Guiding Principles.) Key guiding principles related to special needs include:

“The content of the Benchmarks should be age-appropriate, taking into consideration individual differences in children’s rates of development. Each child is unique in his/her development, growth, and acquisition of skills and competencies. Children typically progress through similar stages of development, but at individual rates. All children within an age range should not be expected to reach a Benchmark at the same time or with the same degree of proficiency.”

“Benchmarks should recognize ALL children as capable of learning, achieving, and making developmental progress regardless of their physical/emotional conditions, backgrounds, or experiences. A universal set of benchmarks should be developed for all children regardless of cultural and economic differences, presenting disabilities, and physical and learning challenges. The benchmarks should take into consideration this diversity and make accommodations for the unique nature of each child’s learning and development.”

The Guiding Principles also address all three areas of the Benchmarks development—the development process, content and implementation.

Advisory Panel members. The public/private Advisory Panel included professionals in special education and disabilities. These members included:

- Susan Bresnahan, Special Education Coordinator, Spokane Public Schools

- Jean Kelly, Ph.D., Research Professor, Department of Family and Child Nursing, and Director, NCAST-AVENUW Programs, University of Washington
- Jill Sells, M.D., Pediatrician and early childhood consultant
- Kris Slentz, Ph.D., Department Chair, Special Education, School of Education, and Professor of Early Childhood Education, Western Washington University
- Karen Walker, Program Supervisor, Early Childhood Special Education, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction

Reviewers. Columbia University, the primary author of the Benchmarks, sent the initial draft for review to Mary Beth Bruder, Ph.D. (Professor of Pediatrics, University of Connecticut Center for Development Disabilities), a national special education expert. A first review draft was circulated for comment to several specialists, including: Mary Ann Barnes (Birth to Three), Susan Banks, Ph.D. (Asst. Professor, Special Education, School of Education, Washington State University) and Leslie Keller (Division of Child Care and Early Learning, Dept. of Social and Health services).

In the second review, the Children with Special Needs Affinity Group will review the Benchmarks draft. The affinity group includes staff from the state Department of Health; the Children with Special Health Care Needs Project; mental health specialists; local nursing directors from special health care needs programs; and birth-to-three programs.

Columbia University will also be sending the November 2003 Draft Benchmarks by a special education expert at the University.

2. Content of the Benchmarks

The introduction to each domain addresses children with special needs. See especially the section in each introduction titled "Addressing the Diversity of Young Children."

In addition, the child indicators and adult strategies in each domain are written to be as inclusive as possible, while recognizing that not all will be relevant for every disability or every teacher/parent.

3. Implementation

There are three important points to keep in mind regarding implementation of the Benchmarks:

- The Benchmarks are voluntary.
- The Benchmarks are a foundational source document.
- The intent in developing the Benchmarks is to provide a document that public agencies and private organizations will use to create tailored tools for specific audiences. This certainly includes tools to use with children whose development is not typical.